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Reagan Changes His Tune

WASHINGTON
President Reagan has changed his tune and moved part way to quell the crisis over Iran and Nicaragua, but the uproar goes on.

A week ago, the President was defiant. The Cadillacs were circling the White House stockade, and the President was telling Time magazine that the American people would support him.

Since then, he has plunged in the popularity polls further and faster than any other President and has appointed Frank Carlucci, a no-nonsense former Defense and Central Intelligence Agency official, as head of the National Security Council. He has also named former Senator John Tower of Texas head of a special review board to study the activities of the N.S.C.

"If we're to maintain confidence in our Government's foreign policy apparatus," the President told the Tower review board, "there must be a full and complete airing of all the facts."

That is precisely what the leaders of both parties in Congress are demanding, and that is also precisely what they're wondering whether they'll get, even from a special independent prosecutor, which President Reagan has reluctantly approved, or from the Tower review committee.

For the central question is how to get "all the facts," and Lieut. Col. Oliver North, who knows them better than anyone else, has invoked the Fifth Amendment to avoid self-incrimination.

The President or his former superiors in the Marine Corps cannot compel Colonel North to testify, but the Congress can promise him immunity from criminal prosecution if he will talk, or put him in danger of obstruct-

ing justice if he refuses to tell what he did and with whose approval.

Accordingly, what started as an adventure within the White House and developed into both a farce and a tragedy, is now a tangle of legal obscurities, with the Attorney General hoping to investigate his own Government's misconduct, and six or seven Congressional committees promising to carry out their separate investigations, no matter how long it takes next year, when the Democrats will be in control of the investigative committees of the Congress.

To many leaders of the President's own party, this is a nightmare. They are urging him to make a clean sweep of all the principal officials of the Cabinet and the White House who had anything to do with approving this secret shipment of arms to Iran and money to the contras, or whoever got the scratch — nobody yet knows.

This means firing Mr. Regan, the White House chief of staff, and William Casey, the head of the Central Intelligence Agency, who are suspected of knowing about the deal for arms for Iran even if they did not know about all of Colonel North's financial maneuvers to get money to the contra rebels in Nicaragua.

The President, however, is in an awkward position to clean house, even though he proclaimed Ollie North "a national hero" and fired him. For he still insists that this whole disaster wasn't a fiasco or even a "mistake" or a "failure", but merely a procedural misjudgment that was carried out without his complete knowledge.

Unfortunately, the White House adventures in Iran and Nicaragua are being compared to President Nixon's calculated deceptions at Watergate. This is a bad analogy, for several reasons.

Mr. Nixon covered up his illegal activities, but President Reagan and his Attorney General announced the follies of Iran and Nicaragua. The main question for President Nixon was what did he know and when did he know it; the embarrassing question for President Reagan is what didn't he know and why didn't he know it.

Yet there is one danger for President Reagan as there was for President Nixon — namely that this scandal, unless it is quickly admitted and corrected by new officials and new procedures, will dominate more important affairs for the rest of his term.

"I have a lot of things to do in this job," he told Hugh Sidey of Time. That is undoubtedly true — beginning with the central question of the control of nuclear weapons, which despite some mistakes and misunderstandings made more progress in the Reagan-Gorbachev summit meeting in Iceland than since the invention of the atomic bomb.

How to get out of this latest problem and back to the central questions of world affairs is now the final test of Mr. Reagan's Presidency. □